

Third Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anna Quindlan writes for Newsweek magazine. Every other week, she trades off with George Will and writes an opinion piece appropriately called, "The Last Word," as it occupies the last page of the magazine each week. I believe she is one of the most gifted and articulate writers out there today. I commend her to you. If you don't get Newsweek, you can read her columns on line at AnnaQuindlen.com and follow the appropriate links to her Newsweek pieces.

Over the years, she has written for many different newspapers and magazines, authored several best-selling books, and even sold her soul for a little Christmas ditty of a book that in my opinion was more fluff than substance but probably made her more money than her other books, which are all significant and which each have something of substance to communicate.

She started out, years ago, writing a little column in the New York Times' Thursday Home section called "Life in the Thirties," which chronicled her life with her growing family, the compilation of which remains one of my favorite books.

One of those columns in that collection spoke about the night her first born came into her and her husband's bedroom and proclaimed that she had discovered that monsters lived in the closet.

She said she had been anxiously awaiting that day, because a) as a child she was certain that monsters lived in the closet and b) was wondering when her child, who was getting on in years, would come to the same conclusion. Well, it finally came, she proclaimed, but then had the difficult decision before her as to how she would answer her child. On the one hand, she wanted to reassure her child that monsters did not, indeed, live in her closet, but on the other hand, didn't want to disavow the reality that, in this world, there are monsters and things that go bump in the night of which we should genuinely be afraid. She also struggled with the fact that she found it difficult to malign closet monsters, obviously a figment of a young child's imagination and yet talk lovingly about Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. To make a long story short, the conclusion she reached was to simply hold her child lovingly and allow her to figure these things out on her own

because, as she writes, “Some things you can be taught, others you have to learn.”

To which I would like to add, “Yes, and there is a time for teaching and a time for learning.” The ancient biblical writer Qoheleth, sometimes translated, “The Preacher,” writes in the biblical book we know as Ecclesiastes, “There is a time for everything under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to sow and a time to reap.”

Timing is everything, says the successful comic, and we know it to be true, because each of us has learned our lesson or at least one lesson about timing, haven't we?

- When Mom is on the war path, you don't complain about what's for dinner.
- When Dad is in the midst of doing the taxes, you don't bring up your allowance.
- When your choral director is butchering the timing of a particular section, you wait for the accompanist to tell him (her).
- When you get pulled over for speeding, that's not the time to remind the sheriff that your taxes pay his salary.
- There's a time for everything under heaven.

When Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the gospel,” what he was saying was that the time had come. There's a time for everything under heaven and the time for the message Jesus was prepared to bring had come. All things considered, nothing else had changed,

- no regime change, (the Roman empire was as strong as ever),
- no natural catastrophe occurred
- no global shift in population,
- no pandemic,
- no melting ice cap,
- no famine,
- no significant war,
- just the timing.

It was now God's time to act. And that changed everything.

Witness Jonah, from our first lesson. You'll recall his story. Part of his problem, no, **most** of his problem was that he was working on his own time and his own agenda. God sent him to Nineveh, to preach repentance and he didn't want to. So he skipped town, hopped a boat, caused some trouble, got thrown overboard for being a Jonah, got swallowed by a big fish, and after smelling sushi for three days, got vomited up back on the very shores and the very task from which he had hoped to escape. Our lesson contains the subtle but undeniable reality of Jonah's situation, "And God spoke to Jonah A SECOND TIME, "Go to Nineveh, (like I told you once before) and proclaim to them that the time has come for them to repent," the time has come for them, and YOU, by the way, to accept what God wants in God's time. Nothing else has changed, except the time.

Jesus begins his ministry and approaches first Peter and Andrew and then James and John and subsequently the other 8 and says, the time has come for you to accept God's message and mission. Notice he doesn't say that they have to change, they're still fishermen, they are who they were, only the time has come for them to fish for something else. Be who you are, use the gifts you have, only this time, use them this way, because God needs you and the time has come, for you.

Every time I read the account of how Jesus recruited his disciples and how the gospel writers all say how they immediately left what they were doing to follow him, I always have the same thought, "What made them do that?" Were they so dissatisfied with their lives that the moment someone presented them with any alternative, they jumped at the chance? Were James and John so fed up working for their father that when Jesus came and simply said, "Follow me," they left house and home and family and income to chase Jesus around Galilee, with no hope or promise?

I can't believe that's how it was or that that's who they were. Rather I would like to believe that the reason they followed Jesus was because it was the right time to do so, that they recognized, in him, that this was the time, that this was their time, to answer God's call as it was presented to them in this Jesus.

Nothing else had changed, except their perception of the reality of life as it was being presented to them by him and through his interpretation of what God wanted in the world. The gospel writers use the word repent, which is nothing more than the desire to change.

- At some point you come to the realization that you don't want to be fat anymore. One day comes and you realize that the happiness God wants you to have has eluded you.
- You wake up one morning and the haze from the alcohol you drank the night before is no longer what you want and how you want to feel.
- You look across the dinner table at your family and you realize you want something better for them.
- You look at your company's 15.4 billion dollar loss and the man who was at the helm at the time and you learn that he spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a rug, two chairs and a new toilet for his new office at your bank a scant 5 months later and finally, a little bell goes off that says, "Wait a minute."
- Or you step into a voting booth, and having made your own decision for what's best for your country, you pull the lever of the candidate you believe will exercise his best judgment for you and your fellow countrymen and women and it doesn't matter so much what the color of his skin is.

You watch the evening news one night and come to the conclusion

- that a good bit of the world does not have to go hungry every night,
- and that children do not need to die from preventable diseases or get sick from dirty water,
- and that I throw too much paper in the trash,
- and that I don't need to drive everywhere in the car,
- and I can survive if I turn the heat down or the air conditioning up,
- that the food I eat, the coffee I drink, the plastic bottle out of which I drink, the plastic bag with which I haul it away from Wegmans, the light I leave on in the basement ALL THE TIME, the products I consume without any thought for who made them how or where and to whose benefit, all make a difference and affect others besides me.

When Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the gospel," what he was saying was that the time has come. To which I add my friend's closing words, "Some things can be taught, others you have to learn."

Amen.